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Autumn List 19644. HOFMEYR,
by Alan Paton

Alan Paton, the renowned novelist of CRY, THE BELOVED COUNTRY and TOO LATE THE PHALAROPE, turns to biography in this life of J.H. Hofmeyr, who was Acting Prime Minister of South Africa during the last war for long periods when Smuts was in Europe and America.

Hofmeyr was a schoolboy prodigy forced on by a dominating and ambitious mother. He matriculated at 12, won a Rhodes Scholarship at 15, achieved a double first at Oxford, became a Professor of Classics at 22, Principal of a university at 24, and Administrator of the Transvaal at 29.

Entering politics, he soon found his Christian, liberal principles opposed to the prevailing currents of opinion in Parliament, even within his own party. But he established himself as a humorous, incisive and sometimes devastating speaker, and when he became a Cabinet Minister, as a brilliant administrator and a tremendously hard worker, shouldering a huge burden of responsibility particularly during the war.

The hopes of the growing group of liberals in South Africa just after the war, among them Alan Paton himself, became centred around Hofmeyr, either as the successor to Smuts or the potential leader of a Liberal Party. Smuts was defeated at the 1948 election, and anyway outlived him, but it had become clear that Hofmeyr would not succeed Smuts because his increasingly liberal beliefs were out of tune with those of the white electorate; of this the Afrikaner Nationalists took full advantage by persistently harrying him.

In 1948, at the age of 54, he died. "So great a light went out in the land, making men more conscious of its darkness. It was a light of a man not radiant by nature but by character."

To many he seemed cold, inhuman, insensitive. But there was another side to him, enjoyed by those who saw him romping at boys' clubs and camps, or playing his beloved cricket, or speaking at public occasions, or at home with his mother. And above all he had courage in his convictions.

To his biography of this complicated man, with whom he was personally acquainted, Alan Paton brings all his perceptive intuition as a novelist; this is particularly evident in the accounts of Hofmeyr's relationship with his remarkable mother, and with Smuts, by whom he was fascinated yet with whom he often differed fundamentally; and in the subtle play of personalities in university and politics.

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To his intensive study of Hofmeyr's times, Alan Paton brings a further dimension: he was and is an active participant in that struggle still raging in South Africa between various conflicting forces.

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